

# **TONGA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom with the government and nongovernmental organizations. The U.S. government did not maintain a resident embassy in the country; the ambassador in Suva, Fiji, is accredited to the government.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the preliminary 2011 census, the total population is 103,036. According to more detailed 2006 census data, membership by percentage of population of major religious groups is as follows: Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, 37 percent; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 17 percent; Free Church of Tonga, 16 percent; and the Roman Catholic Church, 11 percent. Other Christian denominations, including the Tokaikolo Church (a local offshoot of the Methodist Church), Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Anglicans, and Jehovah's Witnesses, in total account for approximately 14 percent. Bahais, Muslims, Hindus, observers of Chinese traditional festivals, and Buddhists together constitute approximately 4 percent of the population; the remaining 1 percent declined to state a religious affiliation.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

There is no state religion. The government recommends that church groups register for tax purposes but does not require them to do so. The government

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permits all religious groups to import goods intended for religious purposes duty free but does not subsidize any religious group or grant tax-exempt status.

The constitution states that Sunday as the Sabbath day is to be “kept holy” and that no business can be conducted “except according to law.” The government makes an exception for hotels and resorts that are part of the tourism industry but not for any other businesses, regardless of a business owner’s religion.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the year.

The government-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) maintains policy guidelines regarding the broadcast of religious programming on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga. The TBC guidelines state that in view of “the character of the listening public,” those who preach on TV Tonga and Radio Tonga must confine their preaching “within the limits of the mainstream Christian tradition.” All religious groups are permitted to host programs on Radio Tonga and TV Tonga, but discussions of the basic tenets of non-Christian religions are not permitted. Notices of activities of all churches were broadcast on both Radio Tonga, TV Tonga, and on privately-owned radio and television stations.

Foreign missionaries are active in the country and operate freely.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

A number of religious groups including Mormons, members of the Free Wesleyan Church, Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists, and Bahais operated schools.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

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U.S. government officials discussed religious freedom during meetings with the government and nongovernmental organizations. The U.S. government did not maintain a resident embassy in the country, and the ambassador in Suva, Fiji, is accredited to the government. Embassy Suva placed opinion pieces and articles on religious freedom and tolerance in regional media that Tongans read.